

Alexandre Kojève

1902-1968

Gentlemen! We find ourselves in an important epoch, in a fermentation, in which Spirit has made a leap forward, has gone beyond its previous concrete form and acquired a new one. The whole mass of ideas and concepts that have been current until now, the very bonds of the world, are dissolved and collapsing into themselves like a vision in a dream. A new emergence of Spirit is at hand; philosophy must be the first to hail its appearance and recognize it, while others, resisting impotently, adhere to the past, and the majority unconsciously constitute the matter in which it makes its appearance. But philosophy, in recognizing it as what is eternal, must pay homage to it.

Hegel, *Lectures at Jena* of 1806,  
final speech

The courage of truth, faith in the power of Spirit, are the first condition of philosophy. Man, because he is Spirit, can and must consider himself worthy of everything that is most sublime. He can never overestimate the greatness and power of his spirit. And if he has this faith, nothing will be so recalcitrant and hard as not to reveal itself to him.

Hegel, 1816

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

1968

Queneau's collection of Kojève's thoughts about Hegel constitutes one of the few important philosophical books of the twentieth century—a book, knowledge of which is requisite to the full awareness of our situation and to the grasp of the most modern perspective on the eternal questions of philosophy. A hostile critic has given an accurate assessment of Kojève's influence:

Kojève is the unknown Superior whose dogma is revered, often unawares, by that important subdivision of the "animal kingdom of the spirit" in the contemporary world—the progressivist intellectuals. In the years preceding the second world war in France, the transmission was effected by means of oral initiation to a group of persons who in turn took the responsibility of instructing others, and so on. It was only in 1947 that by the efforts of Raymond Queneau, the classes on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* taught by Alexandre Kojève at the *École des Hautes Études* from 1933–1939 were published under the title, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. This teaching was prior to the philosophico-political speculations of J. P. Sartre and M. Merleau-Ponty, to the publication of *les Temps modernes* and the new orientation of *Esprit*, reviews which were the most important vehicles for the dissemination of progressivist ideology in France after the liberation. From that time on we have breathed Kojève's teaching with the air of the times. It is known that intellectual progressivism itself admits of a subdivision, since one ought to consider its two species, Christian (*Esprit*) and atheist (*les Temps modernes*); but this distinction, for reasons that the initial doctrine enables one to clarify, does not take on the importance of a schism. . . . M. Kojève is, so far as we know, the first . . . to have attempted to constitute the intellectual and moral *ménage à trois* of Hegel, Marx and Heidegger which has since that time been such a great success. [Aimé Patri, "Dialectique du Maître et de l'Esclave," *Le Contrat Social*, V, No. 4 (July–August 1961), 234.]

Kojève is the most thoughtful, the most learned, the most profound of those Marxists who, dissatisfied with the thinness of Marx's account of the human and metaphysical grounds of his teaching, turned to Hegel as the truly philosophic source of that teaching. Although he made no effort at publicizing his reflections, the superior force of his interpretations imposed them willy-nilly on those who heard him. For this reason, anyone who wishes to understand the sense of that mixture of Marxism and Existentialism which characterizes contemporary radicalism must turn to Kojève. From him one can learn both the implications and the necessary presuppositions of historicist philosophy; he elaborates what the world must be like if terms such as freedom, work, and creativity are to have a rational content and be parts of a coherent understanding. It would, then, behoove any follower of the new version of the left who wishes to think through the meaning of his own action to study that thinker who is at its origin.

However, Kojève is above all a philosopher—which, at the least, means that he is primarily interested in the truth, the comprehensive truth. His passion for clarity is more powerful than his passion for changing the world. The charm of political solutions does not cause him to forget the need to present an adequate account of the rational basis of those solutions, and this removes him from the always distorted atmosphere of active commitment. He despises those intellectuals who respond to the demands of the contemporary audience and give the appearance of philosophic seriousness without raising the kinds of questions which would bore that audience or be repugnant to it. A certain sense of the inevitability of this kind of abuse—of the conversion of philosophy into ideology—is, perhaps, at the root of his distaste for publication. His work has been private and has, in large measure, been communicated only to friends. And the core of that work is the careful and scholarly study of Hegel.

Because he is a serious man, Kojève has never sought to be original, and his originality has consisted in his search for the truth in the thought of wise men of the past. His interpretation has made Hegel an important alternative again, and showed how much we have to learn from him at a time when he seemed no longer of living significance. Kojève accomplished this revival of interest in Hegel not by adapting him to make him relevant, but by showing

that contemporary concerns are best understood in the permanent light of Hegel's teaching. Kojève's book is a model of textual interpretation; the book is suffused with the awareness that it is of pressing concern to find out precisely what such a thinker meant, for he may well know much more than we do about the things that we need to know. Here scholarship is in the service of philosophy, and Kojève gives us a glimpse of the power of great minds and respect for the humble and unfashionable business of spending years studying an old book. His own teaching is but the distillation of more than six years devoted to nothing but reading a single book, line by line. INTRODUCTION TO THE READING OF HEGEL constitutes the most authoritative interpretation of Hegel.

Such a careful and comprehensive study which makes sense of Hegel's very difficult texts will be of great value in America where, though his influence has been great and is ever greater, very few people read, let alone understand, him. He has regularly been ignored by academic positivists who are put off by his language and are unaware of the problems involved in their own understanding of science and the relation of science to the world of human concern. Hegel is now becoming popular in literary and artistic circles, but in a superficial form adapted to please dilettantes and other seekers after the sense of depth who wish to use him rather than understand him. Kojève presents Hegel's teaching with a force and rigor which should counterpoise both tendencies.

What distinguishes Kojève's treatment of Hegel is the recognition that for Hegel the primary concern is not the knowledge of anything outside himself—be it of nature or history—but knowledge of himself, that is, knowledge of what the philosopher is and how he can know what he knows. The philosopher must be able to explain his own doings; an explanation of the heavens, of animals, or of nonphilosophic men which does not leave room for, or does not talk about, the philosopher is radically incomplete because it cannot account for the possibility of its own existence as knowledge. The world known by philosophy must be such that it supports philosophy and makes the philosopher the highest or most complete kind of human being. X

Kojève learned from Hegel that the philosopher seeks to know himself or to possess full self-consciousness, and that, therefore, the true philosophic endeavor is a coherent explanation of all things

that culminates in the explanation of philosophy. The man who seeks any other form of knowledge, who cannot explain his own doings, cannot be called a philosopher. Discussion of the rational state is only a corollary of the proof that the world can be known or is rational. Kojève insists that Hegel is the only man who succeeded in making this proof, and his interpretation of the *Phenomenology* expands and clarifies Hegel's assertion that reality is rational and hence justifies rational discourse about it. According to Kojève, Hegel is the fulfillment of what Plato and Aristotle could only pray for; he is the modern Aristotle who responded to—or, better, incorporated—the objections made to Aristotelian philosophy by modern natural and human science. Kojève intransigently tries to make plausible Hegel's claim that he had achieved absolute wisdom. He argues that without the possibility of absolute wisdom, all knowledge, science, or philosophy is impossible.

It may indeed be doubted whether Kojève is fully persuasive to the modern consciousness, particularly since he finds himself compelled to abandon Hegel's philosophy of nature as indefensible and suggests that Heidegger's meditation on being may provide a substitute for it. The abandoned philosophy of nature may well be a necessary cosmic support for Hegel's human, historical teaching. One might ask whether Kojève is not really somewhere between Hegel and Heidegger, but it should be added that Kojève himself leads the reader to this question, which is a proper theme of philosophical reflection. Kojève describes the character of wisdom even if he does not prove it has been actualized.

Now, the most striking feature of Kojève's thought is his insistence—fully justified—that for Hegel, and for all followers of Hegel, history is completed, that nothing really new can again happen in the world. To most of us, such a position seems utterly paradoxical and wildly implausible. But Kojève easily shows the ineluctable necessity of this consequence for anyone who understands human life to be historically determined, for anyone who believes that thought is relative to time—that is, for most modern men. For if thought is historical, it is only at the end of history that this fact can be known; there can only be knowledge if history at some point stops. Kojève elaborates the meaning of this logical necessity throughout the course of the book and attempts to indicate how a sensible man could accept it and interpret the

world in accordance with it. It is precisely Marx's failure to think through the meaning of his own historical thought that proves his philosophical inadequacy and compels us to turn to the profounder Hegel.

If concrete historical reality is all that the human mind can know, if there is no transcendent intelligible world, then, for there to be philosophy or science, reality must have become rational. The Hegelian solution, accepted by Kojève, is that this has indeed happened and that the enunciation of the universal, rational principles of the rights of man in the French Revolution marked the beginning of the end of history. Thereafter, these are the only acceptable, viable principles of the state. The dignity of man has been recognized, and all men are understood to participate in it; all that remains to do is, at most, to realize the state grounded on these principles all over the world; no antithesis can undermine this synthesis, which contains within itself all the valid possibilities. In this perspective Kojève interprets our situation; he paints a powerful picture of our problems as those of post-historical man with none of the classic tasks of history to perform, living in a universal, homogeneous state where there is virtual agreement on all the fundamental principles of science, politics, and religion. He characterizes the life of the man who is free, who has no work, who has no worlds to conquer, states to found, gods to revere, or truths to discover. In so doing, Kojève gives an example of what it means to follow out the necessity of one's position manfully and philosophically. If Kojève is wrong, if his world does not correspond to the real one, we learn at least that either one must abandon reason—and this includes all science—or one must abandon historicism. More common-sensical but less intransigent writers would not teach us nearly so much. Kojève presents the essential outlines of historical thought; and, to repeat, historical thought, in one form or another, is at the root of almost all modern human science.

It is concerning the characterization of man at the end of history that one of the most intriguing difficulties in Kojève's teaching arises. As is only to be expected, his honesty and clarity lead him to pose the difficulty himself. If Hegel is right that history fulfills the demands of reason, the citizen of the final state should enjoy the satisfaction of all reasonable human aspirations; he should be a free, rational being, content with his situation and exercising all

of his powers, emancipated from the bonds of prejudice and oppression. But looking around us, Kojève, like every other penetrating observer, sees that the completion of the human task may very well coincide with the decay of humanity, the rebarbarization or even reanimalization of man. He addresses this problem particularly in the note on Japan added to the second edition (pp. 159-162). After reading it, one wonders whether the citizen of the universal homogeneous state is not identical to Nietzsche's Last Man, and whether Hegel's historicism does not by an inevitable dialectic force us to a more somber and more radical historicism which rejects reason. We are led to a confrontation between Hegel and Nietzsche and perhaps, even further, toward a reconsideration of the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, who rejected historicism before the fact and whom Hegel believed he had surpassed. It is the special merit of Kojève to be one of the very few sure guides to the contemplation of the fundamental alternatives.

ALLAN BLOOM

*Ithaca, New York*

[Shortly after the completion of this statement I learned that Alexandre Kojève had died in Brussels in May, 1968.]